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Ethics of Ambivalence in Corporate Branding

Abstract

Recent research within the field of organization studies has begun to map out the social and political effects of ethical branding on consumers, employees and society, yet the relationship between employees and brands is still an under-developed area of research. The aim of this article is to investigate how an ethical brand is perceived by its employees and to reveal contradictions that emerge from employee accounts of company brand ethics. The analysis identifies three areas of 'ethical ambivalence' in these accounts, notably: (1) the high employee identification with the brand in contrast to their ignorance of its specific values and practices; (2) the aim of the brand pedagogy to change consumer consciousness, and the admission that this had little effect in practice; and (3) the ambivalence in the stated aim to ethically transform the industry in contrast to maintaining an exclusive market niche. This article provides both an empirical contribution to research on company branding that reveals the contradictions in the employee accounts of their company's brand ethics and a theoretical contribution introducing the notion of 'ethical ambivalence' to explain these contradictions, which shows how such ambivalence permits only a very restricted level of critical reflection about ethical issues. This article highlights the limits of critique at work in a company where it is difficult to differentiate between genuine moral concern and the repetition of simple brand messages.

Introduction

Brands have been described as a key organizing principle of post-industrial capitalism (Arvidsson 2007, 2014, Brannan et al. 2011, Kornberger 2010, Land and Taylor 2010, Mumby 2016). Within the existing literature on corporate branding contrasting accounts have been developed, where some authors have framed brands as a potentially liberating force for ethical consumption and consumer identity creation (Caruana and Crane 2008, Kornberger 2010, Newholm and Hopkinson 2009, Palasso and Basu 2007), and others have criticized them as being built on the exploitation of the unpaid labor of consumers and employees (Arvidsson 2007, 2014; Cova and Dalli 2009, Land and Taylor 2010, Mumby 2016, Willmott 2010). The primary focus of recent empirical research into branding within organization studies has been on the role of brands as mediators of meaning within organizations and their role in employee identity work (Brannan et al. 2015; Endrissat et al. 2016; Jeanes, 2013; Kärreman and Rylander 2008, Müller 2016). These studies frequently note the fact that brands can never completely subsume worker identity and that opportunities for critical reflection are always present, but as yet there has been relatively little investigation of the tensions and contradictions that might form the basis of such critical reflection. The primary aim of this paper is to investigate how an ethical brand is perceived by its own company employees and to reveal the ethical ambivalence at play in employee accounts of their brand ethics.

This paper develops an empirical case study of the successful niche market chocolate producer, 'Zotter'. This company was selected primarily because it has a high reputation within the industry for its ethical brand image, which is grounded in its production of sustainable, organic, Fair-Trade products. It has won also numerous awards for its efforts to develop a truly ethical brandⁱ. This paper makes the following contributions to research into corporate branding: i) it provides an empirical case study of an ethical brand, which

reveals contradictions in the way employees make sense of their brand, and ii) it introduces the concept of the “ethics of ambivalence” as a way to understand these contradictions, and how this ambivalence permits only a very restricted level of critical reflection about ethical issues.

The paper begins with a literature review of corporate branding observing that different approaches to branding exist within the literature including functionalist and interpretative approaches, but the focus of the present inquiry is primarily on critical and ethical approaches to this field of inquiry. Next, the paper develops an empirical case study of Zotter’s ethical brand. The empirical study first shows the key mechanisms the company uses to promote its ethical brand, and then analyses the ambivalence that is present in the employees’ accounts of this brand. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the “ethics of ambivalence” permits only limited space for critical reflection about ethical business practice within capitalism.

Mediation and the ethics of ambivalence in branding

Brand research has its conceptual roots in early marketing science, in the growing concern for the creation of customer loyalty and the distribution of mass-produced commodities at the turn of the 20th century (Alderson 1957, Kotler 1967, McCarty 1960). Research within this functionalist tradition was built upon an understanding of brands as managerial tools that could help to govern the various needs of business organizations such as product distribution (Nox and Bickerton 2013), human resource management (Backhaus and Tikoo 2004, Miles and Mangold 2007) and corporate communications (Balmer and Gray 1999, Balmer and Dinne 2001, Hatch and Schultz 2003). Brands were seen as managerial objects, eventually becoming a quantifiable form of equity (Aaker 1991 and 1996, Keller 1993). Brand management was thus conceived as a marketing tool

and “a source of sustainable, competitive advantage for the organization” (Miles and Mangold 2007, p. 77), where brands have become a ‘distinct mode of capital accumulation’ (Holt 2006, p. 300). As we shall see below, this mainstream marketing perspective on branding has been criticized for its overemphasis on managerial agency in the branding process and for paying too little attention to understanding how brands are interpreted and constructed by other stakeholders.

An interpretative approach to branding has revealed how brands act as mediators of meaning and has been developed in the diverse fields of research including semiotic theory (Manning 2010, Perez and Barion 2013, Santos 2013), consumer culture theory (Arnold and Thompson 2005, Cornelissen, et al. 2007, Csaba and Bengtsson 2006, Holt 2002, 2006, 2016, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Vargo and Lusch 2004) and within organization studies itself (Kärreman and Rylander 2008, Ashcraft et al. 2012, Brannan et al. 2015, Lair 2015, Kornberger 2010). Research within the fields of semiotics and consumer culture theory tends to focus on the way in which the meaning of brands is interpreted and co-constructed by stakeholders outside the company. This interpretative approach understands brands as powerful cultural artefacts that emerge as part of an interactive process shaped by ‘cultural rituals, economic activities and social norms’ (Schroeder 2009, p. 124). Consumer culture theory has emphasized the role of brands in consumer identity construction (Belk 1988) and as a provider of cultural resources for subcultural distinction (Holt 2010, Newholm and Hopkins 2009, Tilley 1999 Muniz and O’Guinn 2001, Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Branding has become a ‘universal category’ of mediation and communication in modern consumer societies (Santos, 2013, p.510). Brands can thus be understood as semiotic mediators that operate both as a ‘symbol’ that can be controlled by management, and an ‘interpretant’ – an ‘effect on the mind’ that is created by the consumers themselves (Santos, 2013).

The role of branding as a semiotic mediator has also been developed in more overtly critical accounts of the branding process (Arvidsson 2007, Mumby 2016). Brands can be considered to act as ‘mediators’ in two related respects. Firstly, this process of mediation has been explained as acting on a subjective level where brands serve as ‘an idealized image that one strives to become’ (Kornberger 2010, p. 92) and an ‘ambiguity coping practice’ for employees (Kärreman and Rylander 2008). Secondly, brands act as an ideological ‘mediatory mechanism’ in articulating the relationship between capital and society (Mumby 2016, p.5). On an ideological level brands mediate between local organizational practices and wider processes of capitalist subsumption (Arvidsson 2007, Holt and Cameron 2006, Mumby 2016). Mumby has explained that the organizational practices associated with branding entail ‘aesthetic and emotion based work...’ where ‘branding is the mechanism through which capital is socialized’ (Mumby 2016, p.4, 6). This form of corporate exploitation has been described in terms of the appropriation of the free labour of consumers, employees and communities (Arvidsson 2005, 2014, Cova and Dalli 2009, Caruana and Crane 2008, Land and Taylor 2010) and in terms of the intensification of the managerial control over organizational culture (Endrissat et al. 2016, Kärreman and Rylander 2008) and corporate ethics (Jeanes 2013, Mumby 2016). Recent work by Arvidsson (2007) and Mumby (2016) has suggested that ethics itself plays an important role in this process of subsumption in the creation of “ethical capital” and an “ethical surplus” that can be exploited by means of brandingⁱⁱ. The ambivalent nature of this “ethical surplus” is the particular focus of the present inquiry.

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the ethics of branding (Arvidsson 2007 2014, Egan-Wyer et al. 2014, Jeanes 2013, Klein, 1999). Muhr and Rehn (2014) have highlighted how companies use the narratives of human rights activists in the branding and selling of their products. Social movement organizations (SMOs) such as Fair-Trade

have themselves been criticized as a branding activity that achieves little more than the 'romantic commodification' of third world products (Zick 2008). Rowlinson's (2002) historical research into the brand of Cadbury's chocolate has revealed how its 'brand experience' presents a 'Disneyfied' version of its corporate history, cleansed of all morally questionable activities that might otherwise tarnish the brand, such as the company's involvement in British imperialism and its past use of slave labour. This critical literature suggests that rather than being a solution to the problems of contemporary capitalism, 'ethical brands may indeed repress – or at least obfuscate – the most urgent ethical questions in capitalism' (Egan-Wyer et al. 2014, p.1; see also Arvidsson 2014).

One consequence of the wide variety of approaches to brand research is that it is not easy to provide a single, incontestable definition of this phenomenon. Manning's (2010, p.34) overview of the literature has concluded that 'there is virtually no agreement on what brand is or means'. To a large extent one's definition of branding will depend upon the particular paradigmatic assumptions in which one's inquiry is based (Kornberger 2010). Our own study is grounded upon a critical conception of branding, which considers branding as a constitutive element of communicative capitalism that 'mediate[s] processes of meaning construction' (Mumby 2016, p.1). The following analysis of employees' accounts of their corporate brand highlights numerous tensions and contradictions in this process of mediation, where the brand acts as an ambivalent mediator between divergent business goals and broader ethical values.

Ambivalence has been identified in previous research as a critical dimension of branding (Banet-Weiser, 2013; Mumby, 2016), but these studies have yet to investigate how this ambivalence plays out in the context of specific organizations. Mumby (2016) has explained the role of ambivalence in terms of an indeterminacy of meaning that enables brands to mediate between the logic of the individualistic neoliberal self and more

‘meaning-based communities’. Banet-Weiser (2013) has proposed that ambivalence provides a ‘productive space’ in which critique is still possible within a brand society. In a similar vein Egan-Wyer et al. (2014, p.7) have argued that ethical brands are constructed around a dilemma between ethics and capitalism. Like Banet-Weiser (2013) they believe that this dilemma offers the consumer an ethical choice where ‘[i]t is in the act of pondering that choice that the consumer is acting ethically’ (Egan-Wyer et al., 2014, p.7). The present analysis reveals that the ambivalence of ethical branding allows for only a very restricted level of critical reflection. This inquiry argues that although ambivalence is symptomatic of the contradictions of consumer capitalism as previous studies have indicated (Arvidsson, 2007; Banet-Weiser, 2013; Egan-Wyer et al. 2014; Mumby, 2016), this should not be interpreted as a productive space of resistance, but is itself a symptom of the subsumption of the domain of ethics as a form of capital. The idea of “ethical branding” ignores the very possibility of a more fundamental contradiction between ethics and capitalism. This inquiry questions whether an ethics of ambivalence can derive from the fact that ‘consumers are attracted to brands that give them the possibility to think about ethics’ (Egan-Wyer et al. 2014, p.7), or whether ethics can be properly delimited by the choices offered by consumer capitalism. Rather than acting as a form of resistance to capitalist exploitation, ambivalence can divert us from more fundamental critical and existential choices that capitalism presents to us. We will now describe the research design used to investigate our case and the ambivalence present in the employees’ accounts of their company’s ethical brand.

Research Design

This research project started with an initial research interest in understanding how employees draw on brands as discursive resources to construct meaning in and beyond their work (Kärreman and Rylander 2008, Jeannes 2013). We selected a company that had a high profile ethical brand image, grounded in the production of sustainable, organic, Fair-Trade products. This particular company is well placed to serve as a “critical case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of ethical branding given its success in creating an ethical brand imageⁱⁱⁱ. Access to the organization and the terms of cooperation were negotiated with the head of marketing. We were allowed to observe operations within the main production site of the company, conduct interviews with employees working in the flagship retail outlets, as well as with members of the company’s senior management team. We were also provided with a range of promotional material intended for internal and external use, including PR material and employee training material.

The primary researcher visited the production site over three days in order to observe the factory and the visitors’ center, taking field notes, photographs and interviews with the management team. The main source of data were 17 semi-structured interviews with the company’s marketing director, the director of distribution, three retail managers and twelve retail assistants employed at three flagship stores. The interviews focused upon respondents’ work routines, related branding activities, initial training and their working environment. As the interviews progressed we refined our interview guideline to include a greater focus on brand ethics and the contradictions and ambivalences that emerged in our data. The interviews lasted 60 minutes on average. The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed in German and translated into English by the primary researcher. Secondary data sources were also an important resource for gaining an understanding of the brand, which resulted in the development of the theme ‘the aesthetic representation of an ethical brand’. The secondary data included printed branding materials, newsletters,

a monthly company magazine, press releases, the webpage, social media and coverage in national and international media.

The first step in the data analysis followed an inductive approach identifying emergent themes and patterns within the data concerning organizational branding processes (Miles and Huberman 1994, Flyvbjerg 2006). The identification of emergent themes was also guided by an initial interest in identity control and ethics (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, Kärreman and Rylander 2008, Jeannes 2013). The analysis proceeded by using both first order concepts and second order concepts (Van Maanen, 1979). The first order concepts that are identified in the following analysis give voice to the respondents themselves concerning their opinions about the company's ethics and its branding processes. The second order concepts "are those notions used by the fieldworker to explain the patterning of the first-order data." (Van Maanen, 1979, p.541). These second order concepts emerged from our own grouping of various contradictory statements made by the respondents, which we describe using the umbrella notion of the "ethics of ambivalence". Three key themes emerged concerning the way in which the employees expressed ambivalence towards the company brand, including: i) ambivalence between the high employee identification with the ethical brand but their ignorance of actual ethical practices, ii) ambivalence between the brand's ethical pedagogy and the persistence of "ignorant" customers, and iii) ambivalence between the goals of transforming the ethics of the chocolate industry whilst maintaining their market niche. We shall now explain the analysis of our findings in greater detail.

Findings

Our description of ambivalence in Zotter's brand begins with an explanation of the ways in which the ethical brand is created and represented on different platforms and media.

The findings reveal a high degree of consistency in the employees' accounts of their company and its brand, however, a great deal of ambivalence emerges from their accounts of external groups particularly their customers and competitors. This ambivalence reveals that despite overt statements of employee identification with the brand, the branding processes are by no means successful in the attempt to reconcile pragmatic business goals with other ethical commitment to environmentalism and Fair-Trade.

The aesthetic representation of an ethical brand

Zotter's branding strategy draws heavily on the use of a unique brand vocabulary combined with a distinctive visual aesthetic. The brand vocabulary has two main characteristics, the first concerning the creation of branded neologisms for company processes and products, and the second concerning the extensive use of vocabulary taken from the Fair-Trade and environmental social movements. The artisanal production process is explained in terms of a brand vocabulary including terms such as 'hand-scooped' and 'bean-to-bar' which relate to the hand-made aspects of the chocolate production and the 'Edible Zoo' which refers to its organic farming methods. An important dimension of the brand is the 365 different chocolate flavours in its portfolio, including unusual ingredients like pumpkin seeds, chili or bacon, each of which has its own unique artwork where the wrappers are custom designed by a freelance artist. The wrappers also display information explaining the moral ideals underpinning its production process, including the company's organic farming and Fair-Trade certifications. The brand draws directly on wider social discourses derived from social movement organisations. The labels of 'organic', 'sustainability' and 'Fair-Trade' are well established in the respected work of environmental and human rights social movements organisations. These same

labels were typically used by the interview respondents in this study to define Zotter as a morally outstanding organisation:

‘... we are organic... we are Fair Trade...we also make sure that our wrapping is sustainable, and ... we do not harm the environment with our activities.’ (Retail Assistant)

The Zotter brand exploits a range of aesthetic and cultural processes of interaction to mediate between the company and wider social concerns about the ethics of production and consumption. About 250,000 visitors a year pass through Zotter's visitors center. An integral part of the factory tour is a film, which is shown to visitors to educate them about chocolate production and to highlight the contrast between their ethical production methods with those of their competitors. The film has a pedagogical function that focuses explicitly on the ethics of Fair-Trade and sustainability and is designed to highlight both the moral and immoral dimensions of chocolate production.

After the induction film the visitors are equipped with an audio guide and can freely walk along a 'Tasting Path' through the 'Chocolate Theatre'. This tasting path is designed as a rich sensory experience where the raw material can be smelled, touched and tasted at each stage of production. The Chocolate Theatre is a genuine production factory, but at the same time this “theatre” provides a carefully managed aesthetic experience offering a “Disneyfied” view of chocolate production (Rowlinson, 2002). One retail assistant explained the Chocolate Theatre in the following way:

‘The reason [we built the Chocolate Theatre] is that everybody can try and taste everything, that one can play Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. And, that [the visitors] grapple with the topic of chocolate production. That they see that cacao is

an important raw material, that it is sold much too cheap, that the producers live in terrible conditions and that our high price is completely OK'. (Retail assistant)

The Chocolate Theatre also plays an important role in the induction and training of new employees. All retail assistants are obliged to attend two full days at this production site and to participate in the Chocolate Theatre and work on the production process itself. An important feature of the Chocolate Theatre is the 'Edible Zoo' which entails a petting zoo for children and a 68-acre organic farm that supplies meat to the visitors restaurant. The 'Edible Zoo' is defined by Zotter in terms of values including sustainability, organic farming practices, love and respect:

'Look the Food in the Eyes: Animals and plants are creatures and not products... We intend to treat them with love and respect.... [Zotter] asks all visitors to take their places, in order to enjoy what is thriving in the Edible Zoo: species-appropriate animal husbandry on 27 hectares, with numerous farm animals threatened by extinction, energy-autonomy, and a closed ecological cycle. With the Edible Zoo Zotter places an emphasis on transparency, sustainability and innovation.' (Zotter, 2017a.)

The company does not clarify how it reconciles the values of love and respect with eating these same animals for food. It claims without any sense of irony that it treats its animals with love and respect not because they are the 'most profitable animals' but because the 'meat tastes the most delicious' (Zotter, 2017b). In the Edible Zoo visitors can walk around, see, feel, touch and smell the animals. This aesthetic encounter is designed to create an emotional connection between the visitor and the brand. With the 'Edible Zoo' Zotter's brand mediates between the relatively isolated act of chocolate consumption and wider ethical values associated with a sustainable lifestyle. What Zotter presents in this

'Zoo' is the material manifestation of a vision of a better, more sustainable world. In addition to these important venues for the inculturation of the Zotter brand, the company makes use of a diversity of additional communication channels. This includes a regular newspaper ('Nibble News'), regular interviews in traditional mainstream media, and a strong presence on social media platforms^{iv}. Despite the lengths that Zotter has gone to in order to create an ethical company and an ethical brand, the discourse of employees themselves revealed a number of tensions and ambivalence concerning its ethical brand, as we shall see in the subsequent analysis which focuses on these points of ambivalence.

Ambivalence between the high employee identification with the brand but ignorance of its ethical practices

The first major point of ambivalence concerned the employee's high identification with the ethical brand, but these same employees had great difficulty in articulating exactly what these values and practices involved. All of the respondents that were interviewed claimed to identify very strongly with the brand values:

'Hmm (...) to live up to Zotter's philosophy, Yes I think I feel a kind of pressure (...) if I look at the label, they are so damn good that I really want to try hard to do better [in following a sustainable lifestyle].' (Retail assistant)

'I only stand here [as a retail assistant] – this I really have to say – because it is Zotter and because it is this product. If it was not Zotter I would not work here, that is clear, I have to say that'. (Retail Assistant)

‘Be it the environment, be it humanity, all those values are represented in this company. All my personal values are reflected by Zotter. I mean, I know nobody like (...) [our CEO] who truly lives by [these values] as an entrepreneur. That is not marketing really, this is reality – an attitude towards humanity and nature that comes from the heart.’ (Sales Manager)

Without exception all respondents expressed high identification with the company and its brand, with quite explicit affirmations such as, ‘they are so damn good that I really want to try hard to do better’, ‘If it was not Zotter I would not work here, that is clear,’ and ‘All my personal values are reflected by Zotter’. Despite these espoused commitments to the company and its ethical values, the interview respondents did not show any in-depth knowledge of Zotter’s ethical practices. Discussion of specific company practices elicited only generic statements such as ‘Zotter is Fair-Trade’. If questioned about what Fair-Trade, organic or sustainability actually meant, the answers remained vague:

‘Organic? There are these standards from the European Union. What organic means? It focuses on the use of pesticides.’ (Retail assistant)

‘That means that these products should be more healthy than products produced with pesticides, and that (the farmers) have certain requirements for the environment and they methods of production which they have to follow.’ (Retail assistant)

Another employee explained the notion of organic chocolate as follows:

‘This means that the beans and all the other products (...) um... there are no pesticides on them, because of course it’s much healthier, and, of course there is also this health aspect, and I think you feel it also in the taste ... um, we are organic and Fair-Trade certified (...) Wait, it’s on the packaging (...).’

It was clear from these accounts that the respondents did not possess a detailed knowledge of the company's own ethical practices, especially relating to Fair-Trade and organic farming. These findings revealed a tension in the responses of employees who, on the one hand claimed a high identification with their company's brand ethics, but at the same did not possess any detailed knowledge of the values or ethical practices that underpinned this brand. Perhaps such identification was possible precisely because of this ignorance. To some extent this may be understood in terms of what Mumby (2016, p.4) has described as the 'complexity reduction which lie[s] at the heart of branding [...] through the creation of ready-made narratives', where the evidence from this case demonstrates that little is known by the employees about the details of the company's ethical practices beyond the repetition of relatively simple brand messages. This reveals a level of ambivalence about the employee's commitment to the ethical brand values where on the one hand the respondents claimed to be firmly committed to the company's ethical ideals and practices but on the other hand they displayed little knowledge of what these values entailed beyond the repetition of ready-made brand narratives.

The ambivalence between the aims of brand pedagogy and the "ignorant" customer

The analysis of the transcripts also revealed ambivalence surrounding the perceived pedagogic^v effects of ethical branding on customers. This ambivalence is apparent in the contrasting views expressed by the employees, where conflicting accounts were given concerning the brand's role in educating customers about the ethics of sustainability and Fair-Trade. On the one hand the employees offered enthusiastic accounts of the brand values and company ethics, but on the other hand, they expressed skepticism about the

actual effects of such ethical branding on their customers. Respondents frequently described the beneficial effects of the brand in terms of inculcating greater awareness about the ethical issues of chocolate consumption and in supporting the 'critical customer':

'I think it is a good idea that people can learn and see how a bar of chocolate is produced. That they understand how many steps go into making a bar of chocolate [.....] that there is a lot of effort between a cacao bean and a bar of chocolate. And that if you are a critical customer, I think that you are able to transfer that onto other products, that there is a reason that some products cost more than others.'

(Retail assistant)

'[The Edible Zoo is] basically a good thing. The hidden agenda is to show that the schnitzel one can buy in the supermarket once was a pig, that in fact we eat animals. And as nice as a cow can look to us, eventually it will be on our plate... and that as a customer I have to accept this fact... that my schnitzel once was a creature. I think that is totally justifiable.' (Retail assistant)

The respondents explained the role of the Chocolate Theatre and the Edible Zoo as a way of ethically educating the customers about Fair-Trade, sustainability and the condition of the chocolate industry. The work as a retail assistant was described as involving an ethical duty of educating the customers in responsible consumption practices:

'(...) We have certain customers who show a strong awareness [for Fair-Trade and sustainability] and who have an awareness that they are buying organic and Fair- Trade products [at Zotter] (...) but of course that's not everybody. That's why we try to acquaint everybody with [these ideas]. Because it is us who

represent the company's philosophy and it is our duty to create and maintain this awareness (among our customers).' (Retail Assistant)

All interview respondents emphasized the pedagogic aspects of their work, to educate 'the critical customer', to 'represent the company's philosophy ... it is our duty to create and maintain this awareness', where 'The hidden agenda is to show that the schnitzel one can buy in the supermarket once was a pig, that in fact we eat animals.' Such accounts lie in stark contrast with the quite different explanations that were offered when the employees were asked specifically about their interaction with customers rather than their opinion of the brand. Employees often portrayed themselves as the 'true believers' of the brand in direct contrast to their customers, who they portrayed as being less appreciative of the brand's values. When discussing the effects of the brand on their customers, one respondent explained that:

'For sure, something stays in the employees' minds. But when a customer was in the Chocolate Theatre five or six years ago, what stays in his mind is that he could eat as much chocolate as he wanted to, and not that the beans have to be harvested by hand. And I doubt that the people are really more sensitive to this topic after their visit.' (Retail assistant)

This view was commonly expressed by the respondents:

'I mean, if I want to look at it critically, I think one has to ask oneself whether it is necessary for so many people to run through our production site on that scale (...) because most of them only come to taste the various chocolates. I think 80% of the people only come to taste the chocolate.... I doubt that what Zotter intends with this transparency of the production process reaches the customers in the same way as it is intended.' (Retail assistant)

‘... there is definitely a tendency among the customers towards the insight that they are doing something good if they consume [Zotter’s products] (...). But basically I have the impression that the customers have less of an idea about the topic [of sustainability and Fair-Trade] than they believe.’ (Retail assistant)

These accounts reveal a great deal of ambivalence on the part of the respondents concerning the effects of the ethical branding on their customers, stating that, ‘I doubt that people are really more sensitive to the topic after their visit’, ‘I doubt that what Zotter intends with this transparency of the production process reaches the customers’ and ‘the customers have less of an idea about the topic [of sustainability and Fair-Trade] than they believe’. The views of the employees were clearly ambivalent, where on the one hand they expressed great enthusiasm about the pedagogic aims of their ethical brand, whilst on the other hand they conceded that these branding processes had relatively little effect on the ethics of their customers in practice.

Ambivalence between transforming the industry and maintaining the company’s market niche

Although respondents explicitly drew on the ethical discourses of environmental and Fair- Trade social movements to describe the nature of their work, there were occasions where employees stated that there are clear differences between the work of Zotter and the work of radical social movements. This ambivalence was particularly manifest in their contradictory claims about the position of Zotter within the chocolate industry, where they justified the need to maintain their market niche at the same time as arguing for radical change in the industry, which would serve to undermine this niche. Interview respondents tended to describe their competitors as being very unenlightened producers

where the industry itself was in need of radical change, as is clear from the following accounts:

‘No, we don’t talk about them in any evil or aggressive way, (...) [our CEO] talked to one of these guys from Jupiter [an industry leader], it was at a trade fair. He said you could rebuild your business, you could work sustainably, you could work in a fair way. So he [our CEO] appealed to his [Jupiter representative’s] conscience (...) but I think in those companies the will for change is missing (...)’

The Marketing Director referred directly to competitors in explaining the importance of Fair- Trade practices for Zotter’s business model:

‘It would be nice if they [competitors] would stand up more for where they purchase their cacao (...). We [Zotter] are interested in the farmer behind the bean...’

One respondent described Zotter’s expansion plans into Chinese markets as a way of transforming the industry by exporting Zotter’s ethical business model to other countries:

‘[With the expansion to Shanghai] Zotter can teach the Chinese people, whose economy is based mainly on the exploitation of resources, how to conduct business in a sustainable way (...), that is really cool, this social-pedagogical approach, this market education approach, that’s really cool shit!’ (Retail assistant)

These accounts described Zotter as being morally superior to their competitors and proposed that the industry is in need of fundamental transformation, where their competitors need to ‘rebuild [their] business... work sustainably, ...work in a fair way’ and should ‘stand up more for where they purchase their cacao’. However, a quite different account was given of their industry role when employees were asked about the brand’s

niche market status and its high price. Zotter chocolate is sold on the market for roughly four times the price of a regular bar of chocolate – an extremely high price. When discussing its high price, employee accounts acknowledge that the ‘ethical’ character of their product is relatively limited to a niche market:

‘... [Zotter is] a prestige organisation. I don’t think that people see the Fair Trade, organic, sustainability concepts that Zotter wants to be seen and associated with; I don’t believe that. I believe that people basically think that it is expensive chocolate.’ (Retail assistant)

‘... of course we want to earn something so that the company can be successful... It is very simple: we all want a fair wage and a safe place to work. We cannot work or give something away for free. We can only produce more cheaply if we buy cheaper raw materials, but this would change the character of our product.’ (Retail assistant)

These accounts acknowledge that the company's pursuit of its wider ethical goals is severely constrained by the high price of its product and its niche market status. In fact the distinctiveness of the company brand is grounded in its niche market status and its very high price. The high price cannot be questioned as being illegitimate because it is the proof of the high quality of the raw materials, the sustainable production methods, and the fair prices paid to farmers for these materials.

Ambivalence is clear in these accounts of the company's divergent goals which aim both to maintain its market niche in the chocolate industry as an ethical producer while simultaneously aiming to transform the ethical practices of the entire industry. These goals are clearly inconsistent and ambivalent because the company's ethical niche market only exists as long as the rest of the industry refuses to change its business practices^{vi}. To

some extent this was recognized by respondents, where one sales manager remarked that despite the company's admirable claims for wider industry change, that, 'It is not our job to change the world...'. There was clear recognition from the respondents that the continuing success of the company was dependent upon industry inertia and the maintenance of their own high priced niche market. We now turn to a broader discussion and critical evaluation of the significance of these different aspects of ambivalence for our understanding of the ethics of corporate branding.

Discussion and Conclusions

The contribution of this paper is twofold: i) it provides an empirical case study of an ethical brand which reveals the contradictions in the employees' accounts of their company's brand, and ii) it introduces the concept of the "ethics of ambivalence" as a way to understand these contradictions, showing how this ambivalence permits only a very restricted level of critical reflection about ethical issues. The ethics of ambivalence here is less a sign of resistance to power, as has been suggested by previous studies (Banet-Weiser, 2013; Mumby, 2016), than a symptom of the kinds of tensions that emerge when putting ethical discourses in the service of a niche brand. The company's ethical claims about its sustainable and Fair-Trade practices are not in dispute here, however, these move well beyond a description of its internal company operations, and extend to claims regarding the values of its employees, its customers, and serving as a vanguard for the ethical transformation of the industry. It is about these broader claims that the employees became highly ambivalent.

In contrast to studies that have argued that ambivalence provides a foundation for the immanent critique of capitalism (Banet-Weiser 2013, Mumby, 2016), this case shows that

the ambivalence over brand ethics is little more than a symptom of the subsumption of ethical discourses by a company, which allows it to present a superficial critique of capitalism at the same time as exploiting a comfortable market niche within this very system. In this respect the ambivalence of the brand in this inquiry serves as a tactic of cooptation of ethics in the service of capitalism, rather than resistance to capital. Mumby (2016, p.10) has explained that brands embody a 'politics of ambivalence' in mediating the contradictions that arise between their appeals to an individualistic neoliberal self on the one hand and "meaning-based communities" on the other. His critical analysis of branding has observed that "branding possesses its own internal ... contradictions that lay it open to immanent critique and resistance" (Mumby 2016, p.18). In a similar vein Banet-Weiser's (2013, p.231) original conception of the politics of ambivalence highlighted the 'productive space of ambivalence' in which critique is still possible within a brand society. The present study highlights a somewhat different aspect of the ambivalence of brands, which entails an accommodation within the existing capitalist system to maintain a profitable niche market, rather than offering more radical resistance to capitalism or direct action against the exploitative practices of the industry.

This study extends existing research on brand-mediated cultural control (Brannan et al. 2015; Endrissat et al. 2016; Jeanes, 2013; Kärreman and Rylander 2008, Müller 2016; Mumby, 2016) by mapping the contradictions and ambivalence that emerges in employee accounts of an ethical brand. This paper agrees with Jeanes' (2013, p.170) finding that ethical branding "reduces and devalues alternatives and resistance to the brand", and further shows how ethical branding offers only a limited critique of business ethics which carefully avoids questions concerning more radical tactics of protest or direct ethical challenge to modern consumer capitalism (e.g. Klein 1999). In this respect, Arvidsson (2007, p.23) has described ethical branding in terms of a general process whereby the

“unethical nature of capitalism seems to have been surpassed...” where it “remediates the ethical”. The present inquiry sheds light into this “remediation” of the ethical by showing how on the one hand employees expressed a strong commitment to their company's ethical brand, but on the other hand, they were highly ambivalent regarding the limitations of these ethical commitments in practice.

This case study does not suggest that all forms of ambivalence are similarly reactionary in nature. In fact, some early theorists of the ethics of ambivalence diagnosed the radical choices faced by committed social activists in terms of ethical ambivalence (de Beauvoir, 1948; Sartre 1948). The existential decision to engage in active resistance against a tyrannical system entails a fundamental ambivalence where no transcendental moral code can act as a guide. The existentialists thus described a radical ethics of ambivalence that faced activists who rejected the capitalist system *in toto*. However, the present case study does not entail the kind of existential ambivalence that individuals face when engaged in radical protest and direct action. Instead, the ambivalence we found in our case study of ethical branding never questioned capitalism itself and worked entirely within this system. In this light, we would argue that whilst the ethics of ambivalence can have implications for radical forms of resistance, our findings suggest that in this case it is quite reactionary in nature, working entirely within the prevailing system^{vii}. The ambivalence in the case of Zotter emerged from the contradictory claims being made by employees concerning the brand, rather than any radical protest to challenge the prevailing existing system of exploitation.

Being based upon a single case, the standard limitations relating to its generalizability are applicable (Becker, 2014). Nevertheless, given the prominence of ethics in the creation of its brand image this company serves as a “critical case” that may be extended to other comparable cases which use similar branding discourses and it is thus generalizable in its

“force of example” (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.228). This paper has opened up a number of avenues for future research. The concept of ethics of ambivalence requires further research. Extant research into branding has argued that ambivalence opens up possibilities for resistance (Banet-Weiser 2013), however, the present inquiry has shown that for this particular case study precisely the opposite is the case; here ambivalence and the increased socialization of capital operate side by side. The ongoing corporate socialization of capital could also be fruitfully investigated further in terms of the contradictions that are being generated in the corporate world’s attempts to co-opt broader ethical discourses. The present study suggests that we must more clearly articulate a vision of how we can better confront the dangers of increasingly ‘market mediated... relations’ (Willmott 2010) and open up more ethical fundamental questions that modern consumer capitalism poses for us.

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- ⁱ In recent years this company has been nominated or has won numerous industry awards, including the Trigos Bank Steiermark prize for Corporate Social Responsibility, the “Entrepreneur of the Year” prize from its home country’s Chamber of Commerce, it has been rated “excellent” by Greenpeace for its ecological production methods, it is the subject of a Harvard Business School case study on sustainable business methods (Khaire et al., 2011), and is a winner of the “International Chocolate Award”.
- ⁱⁱ Mumby (2016, p.6) defines this idea as follows: “the brand is a hyper-socialized, deterritorialized factory in which the ‘ethical surplus’ of human interaction becomes an object that has exchange value.”
- ⁱⁱⁱ Becker (2014, p.3) observes that the aim of qualitative case studies is not “to produce timeless generalisations...[but] the identification of new elements in a situation... new elements of organization and process”. In this respect, the present study seeks to identify new elements emerging from the growing use of ethical branding (see also Arvidssen, 2007; Egan-Wyer et al, 2014; Jeanes, 2013).
- ^{iv} For example, the German language Facebook site has over 98,000 members.
- ^v We employ the term ‘pedagogy’ because several the respondents expressed the opinion that Zotter was not merely engaged in corporate branding, but was engaged in educating both their customers and their competitors in how to conduct business ethically. One of the respondents explicitly used the term pedagogy to describe this process, and many other respondents discussed Zotters’ attempts to educate their customers about what they took to be ethical business practice.
- ^{vi} The industry reluctance to move to Fair-Trade is also supported by statistics from the International Cocoa Organization that notes that “cocoa sold with the Fair Trade label still captures a very low share of the cocoa market (0.5%)” (<https://www.icco.org/about-cocoa/chocolate-industry.html>).
- ^{vii} Note that existing discussions of the ambivalence of brand ethics such as that of Banet-Weiser (2013) and Mumby (2016) tend to assume ambivalence holds only radical potential and neglect the possible reactionary role that ambivalence may play in ethical discourse.